

Wetlands idea threatens key water project

OCT 14 1993

College Lake reservoir proposal may be in peril

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

A proposed federal wetlands easement for the College Lake area threatens a keystone of the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency's Basin Management Plan.

Agency directors were told last night that property owner Frank "Ted" Remde has been offered \$400,000 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil Stabilization Service for a perpetual wetlands easement on 51 acres of College Lake — which is also being viewed by the PVWMA as a water storage reservoir in the BMP.

The agency is scheduled to adopt the BMP and its companion environmental impact report next month. The BMP looks at a multitude of options for alleviating the groundwater overdraft and saltwater intrusion problems in the Pajaro Valley, but focuses on a series of options as the "preferred alternative."

That includes College Lake as a 6,000-10,000 acre-foot reservoir for winter runoff from Corralitos Creek; importation of Central Valley Project water through the fed-

eral San Felipe project, and construction of a pipeline to deliver the San Felipe water to the coastal agricultural areas where it would supplant irrigation water now pumped from the groundwater basin.

The Pajaro Valley has a congressionally approved entitlement of 19,000 acre-feet of water from the San Felipe project, but that allocation was placed in limbo last year when the Congress passed legislation overhauling the operation of the Central Valley Project and told the federal Bureau of Reclamation to cut back on agricultural water deliveries, to renegotiate existing water-delivery contracts and to not sign new contracts until a long list of requirements are completed.

The agency has been trying to get federal officials to open discussions on the valley's San Felipe allocation. As of last night, there has been no official response from federal officials in Sacramento, said PVWMA general manager Mike Armstrong.

Remde told directors last night

See LAKE / back of section ▶

OCT 14 1993

LAKE

▶ From Page 1

that he will have to decide "within the next few weeks or months" whether to sign the federal easement.

His property, near the Paulsen Road end of the seasonal lake, would be set aside as a wildlife preserve and would probably be inundated no more than 18 inches.

The easement, said Armstrong, might not preclude construction of an 18-27-foot-high dam that would hold winter runoff water for later agricultural use and for replenishment of the underground aquifers, but the federal government might require the local agency to replace the lost wetlands with an equal acreage somewhere else in the Pajaro Valley. That, Armstrong speculated last night, might cost

double the price of the offered easement.

Remde said he's willing to consider alternatives to the federal wetlands easement but also noted that his property has been on the market for the last three years and there have been no offers.

"It's still for sale," Remde told the agency directors. "I haven't signed anything yet but it is creeping along to a conclusion and it is a matter of weeks or months."

Armstrong was told to present some options at the board's November meeting.

The agency's efforts to solve the Valley's underground water overdraft and the resulting saltwater intrusion got high marks from a state official last night.

Ed Anton, chief of the State Water Resource Control Board's water-rights division, said the

state board is happy with the progress that the Pajaro Valley has made so far in solving the valley's overdraft problem.

The state board has the power under state law to force a local community to take action on a water problem and, if necessary, go to court and force the water users to build facilities and pay for them.

It's never gone that far, Anton said, and the board has only once — in the case of the Ojai Valley in Ventura County — taken the preliminary steps of holding public hearings on the area's water problem.

But the state is watching both the Pajaro and Salinas valleys as they try to come up with local solutions to their water shortages.

So far, Anton said, the state likes the progress here in developing a water well-metering ordinance and the augmentation charges which will raise the money needed to pay for any projects that will supplement the valley's groundwater supplies.

Directors last night, on split votes, revised the agency's 1993-1994 operating budget downward to reflect new reduced revenue estimates, and also gave Armstrong the authority to spend up to \$4,500 to expand the agency's usable space in its Landmark industrial park offices to accommodate two new employees that will be hired this budget year.

Armstrong told directors that the agency's projected income

from the water-augmentation charge, which it will begin to collect in 1994, will be only \$31,369 for the 1993-94 fiscal year (which ends June 30, 1994) — compared to the \$2,013,930 forecast in the budget adopted this summer. The difference is reflected by the billing timetable for the water-augmentation charges. Most of the money won't be received by the district until after the fiscal year ends, Armstrong indicated.

The board, on a 6-1 vote with Howard Mauthe casting the only "no" vote, adopted Armstrong's recommendation to cut the budget from \$2.28 million down to \$800,159. Most of the cuts come from the projects category and by scaling back the district-funded water meter-installation program this year from \$1.44 million to \$111,500.

The agency will spend \$127,500 this year to complete the BMP and the EIR, and another \$25,000 to continue collecting groundwater and water-usage data.

It will also spend \$30,000 in preliminary work on the College Lake project and \$30,000 on local recharge project studies. Another \$24,000 will be spent by the agency on water-conservation programs.

Mauthe also cast the lone "no" vote against expanding the district's offices after pulling the item from the district's consent agenda, but gave no explanation for his vote.